

Eagle Tribune

Some relief for train station neighbors in Haverhill

Noisy trains to be replaced, other changes in Bradford studied

0

By Mike LaBella mlabella@eagletribune.com | Posted 4 days ago (9/19/2014)

HAVERHILL — After years of complaints, neighbors of the Bradford train station hope to see changes that will eliminate noise and fumes which make their families uncomfortable.

Neighbors said the problems, which began in the late 1980s when the layover station began operating, have never been adequately addressed over the years, despite many promises made by train officials and local leaders.

At a meeting on Thursday with commuter rail officials and city leaders, neighbors said the ultimate solution is to move the layover station out of Bradford. However, they said they were happy with some of the changes proposed by the MBTA and officials from Keolis Commuter Services, which handles maintenance of the trains.

One short-term solution offered involves removing as many as four “screamer” trains that park overnight at the Bradford station. Officials said these particularly noisy F40 diesel locomotives create a screaming sound when started up and during idling. The officials said these noisy trains will be immediately replaced with newer models that are less noisy and emit fewer pollutants.

To reduce noise and emissions even further, MBTA officials said they plan to put as many as four new locomotives into service in Haverhill next spring. The new units would even less noisy and replace the trains that replace the “screamer” units.

State Sen. Kathleen O'Connor Ives and state Reps. Linda Dean Campbell and Diana DiZoglio scheduled Thursday's meeting so neighbors could directly discuss their concerns with commuter rail officials.

Campbell, D-Methuen, who also represents part of Bradford, said she planned to formally ask the MBTA to look into moving the layover station out of Bradford and into an industrial area in the Merrimack Valley.

“We want to look at other layover options,” Campbell said. “I don't think we should overlook that from a fresh perspective with regional planning.”

Keolis signed a contract on July 1 with the MBTA to begin operating the commuter rail system. The system was previously operated and maintained by the Massachusetts Bay Commuter Rail Company.

Neighbors Bert LaCerte Jr., Mary Zappala and her son Joseph Zappala attended the meeting.

Bradley Kesler, chief railroad officer for the MBTA, presented a short PowerPoint presentation outlining what **times of day and how long trains are allowed to idle** at the Bradford station. It triggered an immediate response from LaCerte, who along with other neighbors have been battling the MBTA for years in **hopes of reducing train idling times and emissions**.

"The site is inappropriate. It's so close to homes," LaCerte said. "Because it's in the wrong place, it creates an enormous problem for the neighborhood."

LaCerte told Kesler that the **city should never have allowed the Bradford layover station to be created.**

Joseph Zappala, whose backyard on Front Street overlooks the layover station, **said the idling times indicated in Kesler's presentation are not always adhered to.**

"Some operators leave the engines on high idle when they pull into the station and let off passengers," he said.

Gerald Francis, deputy general manager for Keolis, referred to his company as "the new kids on the block" and told neighbors that part of the process is to involve residents in finding solutions. He invited Joseph Zappala to be part of a team looking for those solutions.

City Councilor William Macek praised Keolis officials for responding to neighbors' concerns.

"I'm glad there's a new group here," Macek said. "We didn't get any satisfaction for 20 years."

Joseph Zappala said the **most disruptive times for train idling are at 1 a.m., when trains pull into the layover station for the night, then again at 4 a.m., when they start engines** in preparation for morning runs into Boston. He said the idling lasts two hours or more on many weekday **mornings between 4 and 7 a.m. and causes noise and fumes.**

"The idling is for an extremely long time," he said. "Why can't they just shut it down?"

Wood School area neighbor Dominick Pallaria, holding several documents in his hand, told officials that health issues are also a big concern and that **tests show high levels of pollutants in that area of the city.**

"There's **an impact to people's health in that area,**" he said.

City Councilor Melinda Barrett and Mayor James Fiorentini asked train officials what they could to do **reduce the impact of noise on neighbors, such as installing sound deadening mats or a sound wall.**

Kesler told them that he does not have anyone on his staff who is an expert in this area, but that "we can work on keeping the screamers out."

Neighbors said that in addition to the noise caused by idling trains, vibrations cause their windows to rattle.

Steven Adkins, director of maintenance for MassDOT's Rail & Transit Division, told neighbors that commuter trains are following regulatory guidelines in terms of train idling times. But he said from what neighbors told him, he wanted to get to the bottom of the problem.

"This is an awakening for me," he said. "I'll want a detailed understanding of who is working and when and who is idling. I want facts."

City Councilor Mary Ellen Daly O'Brien said regulatory rules aren't the issue and that neighbors want their concerns about noise and pollution addressed.

"To think that it's taken this long is discouraging," she said.

Mary Zappala told officials that their promises sounded much like those that were made 20 years ago and questioned whether any significant changes will happen. She said if neighbors were told years ago that a layover station was going to be created near their homes, she would have laid down on the tracks in protest.

"We have lived under terrible conditions in our own homes," she said. "Do we have hope? No. Do we feel something will be done? No."

"I'm 85... I can't wait another 20 years for the trains to leave that station," she said.

Thomas Mulligan, general manager for Keolis' Boston Commuter Operations, told Zappala that following the meeting he and other officials planned to do a visit the Bradford station to inspect it.

"If you really want to get rid of the noise, you have to move the noise," Mulligan said.

Following the meeting, LaCerte and Joseph Zappala said the changes proposed were encouraging, but they will wait and see what happens.

Zappala said that in the past, he's been put in contact with railway officials, but that over time those officials end up being relocated and communication with them ends.

"We're going to be in the loop this time and hopefully these guys won't be shuffled around," Zappala said.